



Bronislaw Malinowski conducting an ethnography. Image Source: www.johnnyholland.org

ETHNOGRAPHY

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What is Ethnography?

Ethnography can be briefly defined as the systematic study of people and cultures. It is designed to explore cultural phenomena where the researcher observes society from the point of view of the subject of the study. It is a means to represent graphically and in writing the culture of a group. Ethnography is a qualitative research method where researchers observe and/or interact with a study's participants in their real-life environment. It was initially popular in the field of anthropology, but is now used across a wide range of social sciences. A good researcher is required when observing and/or interacting with target audiences in their real-life environment. Ethnographic studies are usually conducted through interviews, participant observation and surveys.





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Advantages and Disadvantages

As a qualitative research method, ethnography offers several advantages. First, ethnographies can account for the complexity of group behaviours, reveal interrelationships among several dimensions of group interactions, and provide context for behaviors. In addition, ethnographies can reveal qualities of group experience in a way that other research methods cannot. They can help determine future questions and types of follow-up research. By expanding the range of knowledge and understanding of the world, researchers often are able to understand why behaviours occur, rather than just noting the occurrence. For example, a quantitative study may find that students who are taught composition using a process method receive higher grades on papers than students taught using a product method. However, a qualitative study might reveal why many composition instructors continue to use the product method even though they are aware of the benefits of the process method.

Ethnographic research has several disadvantages to consider as well. Ethnography is time consuming and requires a well-trained researcher. It takes time to build trust with informants in order to facilitate full and honest discourse. Short-term studies are at a particular disadvantage in this regard. Bias on the part of the researcher can affect both the design of the study and the collection and interpretation of data. Too little data may lead to false assumptions about behaviour patterns, while large quantities of data may not be processed effectively.

When do we use ethnography?

Ethnography is primarily used in the following instances:

- While searching for the meanings of cultural norms and views
- In trying to understand the reasons for the use of certain behavior or practices
- For examining social trends and instances like divorce, illness, migration
- For examining social interactions and encounters
- To understand the roles of families and organizations and their behaviour
- To identify new patterns and gain new insights into social phenomenon
- To understand the hygiene and sanitation practices of communities
- To observe the types of punishment given to children at school
- To study the behaviour of workers in an organization

Examples of Ethnographic Studies

Some of the popular ethnographic studies conducted are:

- **Paul Willis's ethnographic study of working-class youth culture:** In his famous work "*Learning To Labor*", Willis conducts a series of interviews and observations within a school, with the aim of discovering how and why 'working class kids get working class jobs'. He suggested that working class children tend to have counter school culture and oppositions to academics and authorities. This would lead them to workplaces with similar environment and working class dominance.
- **Dame Ann Marilyn Strathern's ethnographic studies of the natives of Papua New Guinea:** In her work titled "women in between" she studied and explained how definitions of gender differ across countries. In her work she is constantly challenging the definitions and social constructs of gender "norms".
- **Kristen R. Ghodsee's ethnographic study on "post-communist Bulgaria":** In her work Ghodsee argued that many East European women would actually fare better than men in newly competitive labor markets because of the cultural capital that they had acquired before 1989. She



further examined the shifting gender relations of Muslim minorities after communism, and the intersections of Islamic beliefs and practices with the ideological remains of Marxism-Leninism.

- **Napoleon Chagnon's long-term ethnographic fieldwork among the "Yanomamo" (indigenous tribal Amazonians):** In his study he used an evolutionary approach to understand social behavior in terms of genetic relatedness. His work has centered on the analysis of violence among tribal peoples, and, using socio-biological analyses, he has advanced the argument that among the Yanomami violence is fueled by an evolutionary process in which successful warriors have more offspring.

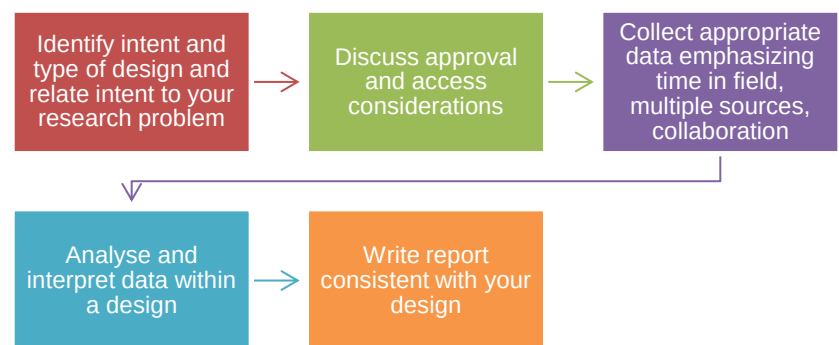
Key Features of Ethnographic Studies

- Usually focus on very few cases, maybe just one, but in detail
- Often involve working with previously unstudied phenomenon
- Emphasise on exploring social phenomena rather than testing of preset hypotheses
- Focus on describing the culture of a group in very detailed and complex manner
- Involve engaging in extensive fieldwork where data collection is mainly by interviews, symbols, artifacts, observations, and many other sources of data
- Field-based and is conducted in the settings in which real people actually live, rather than in laboratories where

the researcher controls the elements of the behaviors to be observed or measured.

- A holistic approach to the study of cultural systems
- A process of discovery, making inferences, and continuing inquiries in an attempt to achieve maximum validity
- An open-ended emergent learning process, and is highly flexible and creative process
- Interpretive, reflexive, and constructivist process
- Requires the daily and continuous recording of field notes
- Tries to earn trust of the respondents

Major steps involved in Ethnography



Skills required for Ethnographic Studies

Ethnographic studies require wide range of skills. These can be briefly listed as follows:

- High degree of **interpretative agility** is required to understand the wide range of issues and facts involved in the study.
- The researcher needs to be **unbiased and unprejudiced** in order for the study to draw valid and reliable conclusions.
- The researcher needs to be **familiar with the social settings** and needs to have a high degree of intellectuality and diplomacy.
- The researcher needs to possess good **interactional and inter-personal skills**.
- The researcher needs to be **sensitive towards the culture, values and norms of the social setting** in which the study is being conducted.

- The researcher needs to be **familiar with the tenets of research ethics**.

Do's and Don'ts

Do's

- Have an open mind, free of any kinds of prejudice or biasness
- Participate as much as you can in the interactions
- Keep a simple stature so that the people feel comfortable and act naturally
- Be diplomatic and supportive towards the views and opinions of the subjects
- An ethnographer needs to be able to differentiate between interesting and actionable findings
- A prior study and understanding of the group and the environment is vital for a good ethnographic study
- Good understanding of social science theory, research methods and research design is important for conducting ethnographic studies
- Think about what you are going to ask beforehand and get familiar with the questions
- During an interview try to put your respondents at ease and choose a setting where your interviewee will feel safe and comfortable
- Do figure beforehand how the observations are to be recorded
- Conduct the study in a relaxed and stress free mood
- Always keep in mind to respect the ethics and norms of the group under the study

Don'ts

- Do not interrupt and simply observe
- Never put pressure on the study subjects
- Do not offend the culture, values and norms of the group under study
- Do not over dress and keep your actions limited
- Never distort the facts to meet the research aim
- Never go unprepared and without prior understanding of the group
- Never cross the ethical boundaries to conduct the research

References

1. [Advantages and Disadvantages of Ethnographic Research](#)
2. [Definition of Ethnography](#)
3. [Employing an Ethnographic Approach: Key Characteristics](#)
4. [Ethnography](#)
5. [Examples of Studies that Can Use an Ethnographic Approach](#)
6. [How to Conduct Ethnographic Research](#)

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